My Journey To The Magnetic North Pole

Preety Sengupta

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

MY JOURNEY TO THE MAGNETIC NORTH POLE

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

ISBN 978-81-237-1943-6

First English 1996
Reprints 1998. 2004 (twice), 2011, 2012 (twice), 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 (twice), 2022 (*Saka* 1944)

© Preety Sengupta, 1996

₹ 40.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
Nehru Bhawan, 5 Institutional Area, Phase-II
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi- 110 070
Website : www.nbtindia.gov.in

EARLY YEARS

I was born in the city of Ahmedabad. I have two elder brothers, and two sisters, one of whom is younger than me. My elder sister chose my name, "Preety". It means "attachment" or "affection".

I like to believe that I got my idealism from my father, and a sense of aesthetics from my mother. Unfortunately, I lost both my parents early—my father, a chartered accountant, passed away before I was five; my mother died before I had flowered into a traveller, a poet and a writer.

My family loved travelling. Long before I was born, my parents and elder brothers and sister went on long trips around the country. And when I was still a baby they took me to Bangalore—thus began my life as a traveller.

My family also enjoyed music and established their own little troupe of singers and musicians. An old photograph of the family shows them seated with their musical instruments—the dilruba, tablas, the harmonium, and tanpura. My mother also organized a nightly hour of singing bhajans

with the neighbourhood ladies. I never developed her leadership qualities. I was very shy as a child—a trait I have never really lost.

My mother sent me to painting and dancing classes, and I also took music lessons. I learnt batik, macramé, photography, Chinese brush painting, had a stint at Middle Eastern belly-dancing and took up singing ghazals and Rabindra-sangeet.

I always finished my homework ahead of time, and never had to be nagged to sit down to study. Exams never scared me—in fact they seemed like fun! I sailed through High School, and enjoyed my studies as well as the various extra-curricular activities in school. I was sad to leave High School and kept returning to the old school to revive and relive happy memories.

The college I attended was very near our house. I had only to jump across the wall, but I wanted to take as long as possible to reach there and so took a roundabout way to get to the building where the Arts classes were held. At first I wanted to do commerce, and become a chartered accountant like my father and brothers but I was talked out of this with the argument that I was not likely to pursue the profession, because I would get married sooner or later.

I was good at languages. Besides Gujarati, my mother-tongue, I knew Hindi, Sanskrit and English. So I finally chose to study English and Sanskrit literature in college.

Though I was shy I laughed a lot when with friends and

in college became very interested in dramatics. Acting took me out of myself. I had also started writing—both prose and poetry—for the school and college magazines, and after completing my Master's Degree I taught English Literature in a local college. Getting Gujarati students interested in English literature was a challenge at times, but I did not have to face it for long, for I soon managed to get a student visa for the United States.

Going to America really changed my life. Alone, and on my own for the first time, I had to fend for myself, make friends, shape my own life. I found a very dependable friend, and a genuinely caring person in one Bengali student. Eventually we got married in New York. I used to say that "he came, he saw, I conquered!" This was the most important decision of my life that I had taken on my own.

Preety Sengupta

FINDING MYSELF

I was often terribly homesick, however, and my love for my country made me very critical of America. I decided that to understand America, I had to see it thoroughly. So I decided to take a long trip by land across America. From then on I have continued to travel—everywhere, often—around India, around America, around the world. It became essential for me to see the land, and quite see the local way of life at close quarters.

Next I ventured out to Europe. I went from England to Greece, then to Scandinavia and Spain, on to France and from there to Austria. I set out without making a single hotel-booking. That was my first venture into the unknown world, and since then I have gone on to bolder journeys. I travelled alone because I wanted to see new places and did not know anyone who wanted to join me. I went because I wanted to go. The inevitable moments of loneliness were infrequent and short-lived. Mostly, there was pure joy, a feeling of harmony with the surroundings.

My husband realized that it was important for me to travel, and I continued travelling after our marriage. I became less shy. I also realized my dream of being a published poet. My essays developed into books, were published and some even won prizes.

I went to many countries—nearby ones (for a person in America), such as Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, and far-away ones such as South Korea, Japan, China and Vietnam; to the easily accessible countries of Europe, and the less accessible ones of South America, to several countries in Africa and to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. By 1988 I had visited over seventy countries, some more than once, and had travelled in six continents. Then I planned to go to Antarctica, the seventh and last continent in the world.

From the southern tip of Argentina I boarded a ship, along with about eighty passengers. During the ten days of that voyage through the Antarctic ocean we saw extraordinary snowscapes, innumerable icebergs, whales sporting in the water, seals lazing on the shore, and three kinds of little penguins. We visited scientific stations belonging to China, Russia, Chile, Argentina and America. It was an exhilarating journey, even though it ended in a shipwreck. The voyage to Antarctica was the culmination of my travel dreams—until then.

THE FINAL DREAM

One would think I had done enough travelling by then. I thought so too, but not for long. Geography had become my obsession and I loved to look at maps and atlases. That is how I realized what a huge area the High Arctic was. I started calling it " half a continent more", and in this way created another place that I had to go to.

I chanced upon information about treks to the Magnetic North Pole. The more I thought about it, the more I felt its pull. I had to go there even if it was the last adventure of my life.

Reaching there would somehow make my travels complete. So I began corresponding with the organizers of treks to the North Pole in the Northwest Territories of northern Canada. The year 1992 was the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' "finding" the Western world and I decided that the greatest journey of my life should coincide with this anniversary. Of course, I was worried about the extreme cold, and the dangers of the trip, but nothing would dissuade me from going.

A few days before I was to leave for northern Canada my husband surprised me with fifty perfect red rose-buds, wishing me a safe return. I took five of them with me, and also a small statue of Lord Ganesh for good luck.

THE HIGH ARCTIC

It was a long trip, from New York City to Montreal, then on to Resolute, a village in the Northwest Territories, set on a small island surrounded by the High Arctic ocean.

Soon after leaving Montreal signs of civilization disappeared, and our plane flew over the glaring monotone of the eastern Arctic snow. Everything was frozen and snowy white—land and water were unified by one colour. And yet, even from thousands of kilometres above, the shapes could be differentiated—the ripples, frozen waves, stunned rivers, mummified canyons.

Among the many adventurers who attempted to reach the North Pole, was Fridtjo Nansen who tried in 1893, but failed; another was Admiral Robert Peary who succeeded in 1909 after three attempts and became the first person to get to the geographic North Pole. The Magnetic North Pole was attempted for nearly 300 years. Finally in 1831 Captain Ross of England succeeded in getting there. The difference between the two poles is because of the tilting of the earth.

The Resolute panorama

The earth's geographic centre is on top of its tilt, but its real centre is the point to which a magnetic compass would lead a traveller starting from any point. I was going to this real centre—the Magnetic North Pole.

As the plane approached Resolute I could see a small cluster of houses, set amidst the snowy whiteness and a long road went from the village towards the small airport. Bezal and Terry, the organizers, met me at the airport. We set off for their lodge, seven kilometres away. Everything in sight was covered with snow. The light was bright, the wind very chilly. But once inside the lodge it was comfortable.

I was introduced to the others who were going to the

Magnetic North Pole with me. We were only five, but ours was a truly international expedition. Besides myself—an Indian—Hans was German, Pascal Swiss, Anthony Irish, and David, a Hong Kong-Chinese, was a British citizen living in London. We were all seasoned travellers but I was the only woman.

The two days before our trek were to be used to get acclimatized and to practice walking in Arctic gear. We were fitted with two heavy windproof outer layers, including a hooded parka, knee-high boots made from horse-leather, and a thick pair of leather mittens. We were advised to put on all the layers whenever we stepped out of the lodge.

I had been worried about the cold, so I had brought several heavy pairs of socks, gloves, and caps. I wore a cotton shirt and cotton leggings next to my skin, because for days on the expedition we would not be able to change clothes. I wore three pairs of socks, and two pairs of gloves all the time, and even then my fingers froze. One long woollen tube insu-

With Pascal

lated my neck well. On the ocean where it was very cold and windy I pulled it on to my head, and covered my ears as well as my nose. Of course the exhale froze the tube instantly and it became cold and stiff. Moreover, my mouth kept picking up tiny tissues from the woven fabric. Nothing was easy in the High Arctic, but it was very important to cover the head properly. On the first day in Resolute I had tried to be "fashionable" by wearing a colourful Himachali cap. It was too thin for the sharp cold, which hit my head, and I saw bright red when I closed my eyes. After that I decided against attempting to look pretty!

The other woollen tube I had was shorter and thicker, and I used it to wrap around one of the cameras. I put the larger camera inside several plastic bags. Without good insulation the camera's battery cells would freeze. The other travellers had trouble with their cameras. David, for one, tried everything—taking the cells out, keeping them in the inside pocket for body-heat, even putting fresh cells in—but his little camera did not always work.

It was also necessary to wear dark glasses, because the sun's glare, reflecting off the all-pervading snow, could be blinding. My sun-glasses fogged all the time, and it was difficult to clean them with gloved fingers. Two layers of gloves did not keep fingers from freezing, but without them, within thirty seconds, our fingers would turn wooden and start aching.

The sleeping-bag we would sleep in when we camped

was stuffed with fine feathers. In addition we wore foam-filled wind-pants in bright blue, and a parka jacket. This outfit expanded our measurements enormously. The boots we had to wear were so heavy that walking became strenuous and lifting a foot an effort. Equipped in these layers we were slow and robot-like in our movements. Sometimes when walking we lost balance, and slipped on the snow.

The first evening in this gear I felt clumsy and awkward. My body was double its size, the arms looked bloated, and the legs were like those of an elephant. Though I was well-insulated, the Arctic wind which brought the temperature down to below minus 45°F blew fiercely, slapping my face, pushing me, and whipping me around. On that first evening it was too aggressive a welcome.

IN AND AROUND RESOLUTE

I wanted to get indoors quickly. My face was chilled, my neck too was chilled. The lashing Arctic wind made a punching bag of me. I had not learnt to cover myself really well.

The lodge was simply furnished but kept very clean. Each of us had a single room, but bathrooms had to be shared. The sitting-room did not get direct sunlight; so tube lights were always kept on. Terry, and her helper Agnes, constantly wiped, washed, swept and dusted.

Meals were served at fixed times. Food was plentiful for everyone, with one exception—me! Terry was not very good on vegetarian food.

In the lodge, there was a substantial collection of books and videos on the Arctic people, life, animals, handicrafts, travels, etc., and photographs and maps of the region on the walls. I leafed through a book on the Inuktitut language, and tried to learn a few words. I discovered that the word for Magnetic North Pole was "Nippirkangnaq", a strange-

sounding word, but based on the Inuktitut word for "something that sticks".

Inuktitut is spoken by the Inuits, the people of the Arctic islands. "Inuit" merely means "people". The Inuits live north of the tree-line, and are comfortable with the sea-ice and rugged coast. About 165 people live in the hamlet of Resolute, all Inuits, except for the organizers who were from Canada and were in the business of organizing treks in the High Arctic.

When I arrived in late April, it was the start of spring, and the light never faded. During spring and summer the days and the nights are white, owing to the sun and the snow. "Day" and "night" have no meaning here. It is "waking time" and "sleeping time". Children play as long as they want, and sleep whenever they get tired. In summertime the sun blazes at midnight, and during winter the moon shines at noon—an upside down world!

Before the start of the expedition we had three days in Resolute filled with activity and outings.

An Inuit child

Resolute actually originated as a weather station in 1946. The village was established in the mid-1960s when oil was found there. Now it is a small, quiet place, difficult to locate on the map. This area is known as the "frozen desert". Precipitation is only about 5 inches in a year, rain and snow combined. Resolute has no vegetation of any kind. It must be depressing because a non-Inuit resident had cut out two tin evergreen trees, painted them green, and planted them in front of his house. These, and some painted tin flowers, made up the only "garden" in Resolute!

Several miles away we saw a small patch of brown, thin, dry grass, and bright red dots of lichen. This particular spot is called the "Thule Site". Thousands of years ago when nomadic man roamed this region, he stayed at places like this, close to the water's edge; and built houses out of stones and whale bones. The one we were taken to see was mostly buried under four feet of snow. Only its roof was visible. Their culture is called "Thule" (pronounced thoo-lee). Even after so many years, some living element still exists in the area, and small animals such as lemmings as well as sparse vegetation, find enough warmth under the snowy ground to survive.

Not too far away, but in another direction, were two "Inukshuk" (pronounced Inookshook) stones stacked to look like men. This was also an ancient Thule practice. These stones were said to be five hundred years old, but they needed to be re-stacked from time to time to form a

Thule culture

proper Inukshuk. One "stone-man" was intact; the other had been battered by time, or perhaps, mischief.

After this we were taken to a far-away hill, which was named Fossil Hill, because it was full of ancient fossils. Millions of years ago this area was at the bottom of the sea. When we went there, it was very windy, and bitterly cold. Still, all of us bent down and searched the thin crust on the ground. The first time I went there I did not find anything. Bezal gave me a small closed clam as consolation. On subsequent visits, however, I found several stones with the impression of shells, corals, and even delicate vegetation. Then, by sheer chance my eyes fell on a whole, fossilized

snail, just as my foot was about to step on it. I picked it up. and showed it around. Everyone was envious! Even Bezal was impressed. He said that such fossils were rare.

It was a circular piece of black stone, slightly bigger than a rupee coin with the shape of the snail showing as distantly as the lines on my palm. At the lodge, I looked up a book on fossils, and was astonished to learn that the snail, and the clam, belonged to the Lower Palaeozoic Era, which meant existence of life about 500 million years ago! This precious find made up for all the discomforts and trials of the Arctic experience.

VISITING HISTORY.

On the second day, by paying a little extra, we joined an outing to a small one-hill island, called Beechy Island, in the middle of the High Arctic Ocean. That was where the famous Franklin Expedition met its tragic end. Sir John Franklin had set sail in 1846 from England to find a northwest passage across the Arctic Ocean, taking two ships manned by 129 crewmen, supplies to last three years, and libraries that contained over 1500 books.

Though these pioneers were men of vision and valour, fate was against them from the beginning. Their ships were stocked with contaminated food, and gradually the sailors became weak and died from lead-poisoning. The first three sailors to die suddenly and mysteriously were buried on Beechy Island. One of them was John Torrington, only twenty years old. The grave-site, with crudely cut wood pieces as tomb-stones carries his name. All the rest on the ship followed the same fatal course over a period of a few months. The ships became locked in the ocean as it froze

Torrington-graves

around them and then disappeared without a trace. Search parties could not find the ships nor any of the men. Eventually, in the mid-1980s, those three long-buried bodies were exhumed. They were well-preserved because of the snow and extreme cold. The tragic story of the Franklin Expedition and an account of the excavation of the Torrington-graves has been documented. I could not look a second time at those horribly vivid photographs of the dead men in the book, but I could not resist visiting such a significant site in the annals of adventure-history.

It was a short 45-minute flight from Resolute to Beechy Island 60 miles away in a small, low flying plane which shuddered in the wind, as it flew over the frozen ocean.

A bear skin streched out to dry

After some time, we were told that the pilot had spotted polar bears. The aircraft circled the area so that we could see the snow-white Arctic animals in their natural habitat. There was a male, a female and a cub which remained close to its mother. It was wonderful to see these animals wandering about freely and happily.

The Inuits have hunted the polar bear for hundreds of years for its meat, skin, bones and nails. Even now, when a bear is killed, the whole village shares its meat. In Resolute, I saw a large bear skin, which had been cleaned and was stretched on a frame to dry in the sun. It would make a very warm blanket.

The excursion to Beechy Island was the first time I stepped on the frozen waters of the Arctic Ocean. Near the shore waves had frozen in their surge. Further up, washed-up pebbles dotted the shore.

SOME ENTERTAINMENT

On the third morning an Inuit man, Simiyoni, was summoned to demonstrate igloo-building to us. Inuits do not live in igloos any more, nor do many know how to make one. Simiyoni was supposedly an expert at igloo-making and was known to be able to make one in less than two hours. We put on all our layers of clothing and rushed out to see the technique. But that was not a good morning for Simiyoni; the blocks of snow kept falling, one after the other.

Five hours went by. Still the igloo was not finished, and we had to go in for dinner. Early next morning Simiyoni returned to finish the igloo. We were delighted with it. It was our igloo. It was fairly big, tilted slightly, had a nice little chimney and a few chinks for air. The domed walls were firm and there was a small, neatly arched opening. As we saw it come up out of nothing, we realized that igloo-making was not an easy art.

That night I slept in the igloo. It was bitterly cold, but it was very beautiful. The igloo shone like a glass-lamp inside.

Iglooing at Resolute

It was like being inside a dome made of opaque crystals. Even when asleep I remained conscious of this glow.

The next night after dinner, an Inuit mother and daughter came to the lodge to perform "throat-singing" for us. Both were fair-complexioned. Minnie, the mother, did not speak English, so her daughter, Dora, explained that the nomadic people had developed this art to entertain children during the long winters. This "singing" had no words; it was made up of humming sounds, and the sounds came from deep inside the throat—without opening the lips. The singers would carry a tune for about a minute and a half, then stop to catch their breath, and start again in co-ordination. This ancient art is no longer learnt by Inuit youngsters today.

THE GROUP

Our small group of five travellers, by and large, got along very well. Pascal at 30, was the youngest of the group. He worked in a bank in a small town in Switzerland. He was intelligent, thoughtful, and had a quiet sense of humour. He and I came to depend on each other when going on walks during the expedition and even after it.

Hans was very tall, 6'6". Due to a leg broken in a car accident he did not move around much or join us for walks. This, however, did not discourage him from taking such difficult trips. He was strong, healthy and, at 69, looked at least ten years younger.

David, about 52, was a dentist. He was accumulating countries, that is adding places to the list of countries he had been to. He was clever and materialistic. He loved luxury, missed it a lot, and constantly complained about the hardships of the trek—the cold, the bumps, etc.

Anthony was in his late thirties, worked in a factory and normally lived with his parents. He travelled as much as his

savings allowed but what surprised me was that he had not travelled in his own beautiful country, Ireland.

Lastly, there was I, in my early forties, the only Indian, and the only woman in the group. I did not receive any special treatment nor was I given any particular privileges, the only exception being that during the trek I had a tent to myself. Dressed in almost identical Arctic gear, there was nothing to distinguish me from the others, except my voice. I did not even remember to pack a face-mirror for this trip!

English was not the first language for any of us, and we spoke it with different accents. As Hans put it, ours was truly a "United Nations".

THE START

The organizers try to arrange for two groups to go to the Magnetic North Pole at a time—each travels one way by sledge and one way by plane. This way hardships are confined to either the journey back or the journey forth. We, the first group, would travel by sledge from Resolute to the Magnetic North Pole and for the return take the plane.

Five sledges were fitted, and loaded. Hans was given a sledge to himself as he could not bend his leg, while David and Anthony shared one and Pascal and I another. The two other sledges had supplies.

Of the five snow-mobile drivers four were Inuits—Pijamini, Oolat, Randy and Clyde. The fifth was a tall, white Canadian called Peter, who was the official leader, and cook.

The day of our departure was cloudless, bright, cold and windy. We were told to be ready before 9.30 in the morning. Bezal was very particular about time. Still, we were twenty minutes late. Terry and Agnes came out to wave good-bye.

Each sledge was attached with a sturdy plastic rope about

Sledge being pulled by a snow-mobile

three metres long to a snow-mobile called a "ski-doo". The ski-doos were bright yellow, with black seats and black handlebars. The low sledges were the colour of weathered wood. A separate wooden structure specially designed for the comfort of the travellers was fastened to the sledges. It had room for two people, sitting one behind the other, and had a plastic window in front to shield the passengers from the wind without blocking the view completely.

The sitting spaces were arranged for us the first day, but thereafter no one helped us. First the sleeping bag's thick roll, in its bright yellow case, was placed snugly inside. Then a foam mattress was laid down under our feet. Finally, a

thick, soft caribou skin was spread covering the entire sitting area. We sat on top of all this. Wooden boards were so arranged that we could rest our backs. We had to do and undo this arrangement every time we camped and de-camped. We soon found out that we could not really rest our backs or lean on the cushiony layers, because we would immediately feel the lash of the wind. We had to sit straight most of the time and that was tiring.

We climbed into the boxes with effort. The bulbous gear and heavy boots made it difficult for us to lift our legs to get inside. I kept my camera-bag near my feet but left enough room to stretch my feet. We had no idea what lay beyond Resolute, nor how the expedition would go; any accident or breakdown of a machine could ruin it, or bad weather might end it. We all had smiles on our faces, but I am sure, a prayer in our hearts.

The first driver was Pijamini, a short Inuit man almost 68 years old. He was very experienced. I learnt to admire his sense of direction as we drove on and on upon the trackless, unmarked surface of the ocean. He led us throughout the expedition. He had David and Anthony as passengers. The second

Just before starting the expedition

ski-doo was commanded by Peter, with Pascal and me in the sledge. I sat behind Pascal.

They had been considerate towards me. This was the best seat: a back seat in the second sledge. It was always possible that the first driver would lose his way or get stuck. The second sledge was at an advantage in these respects. Besides, the person in the front got a lot more bumps, the second person was somewhat protected. David suffered heavy bumps, complained as heavily, and finally on the fifth day changed places with Anthony. Both of them realized right away what a difference the back seat made. On the last day I too changed seats with Pascal for a short time. Bumps there were many, and constant—"a million a day", as Bezal had warned us—but in the front seat they were more severe.

Peter started the ski-doo with a sudden jerk, and dragged us behind him. Within minutes we had left Resolute, and its fifty-sixty houses, behind. Across from the lodge there was a short flagpole, stuck with little wooden arrows pointing to cities like New York, London, Sydney etc. One arrow pointed towards the North Pole. That was the way we were headed.

I was dressed in all my Arctic regalia and looked fat and ugly, but was well insulated. Despite three pairs of gloves and socks, my hands and feet as well as the exposed part of my face froze fast. I covered my face almost completely. My sun-glasses kept fogging up every few moments and I

could not see anything so I had to keep wiping the inside with gloved fingers. Still, I wore fewer layers than the men. I had twelve things on, including gloves and socks. David said he had twenty-two. Even the Inuits wore more but then they were driving and getting the direct brunt of the wind.

Dressed like an "Arctic Mummy"

We moved slowly. The snow looked soft, but was hard and rough. The bumps started right away. The air was freezing. Toes froze, fingers felt worse. My little finger felt so icy that I wondered whether it would be normal again. It was minus 30° or 35° F and the wind made the temperature even lower.

It was white all around, till the horizon and beyond. It was stunningly beautiful. Even more exciting was seeing "sun dogs". We had been moving with the sun behind us. When we stopped, and got out of the sledges, I noticed these fake suns. I pointed them out to everyone excitedly. There were four "mock suns" surrounding the real sun. The two top ones were sharp and clear, the bottom ones were hazy spots

of light. Sun-dogs are created when ice crystals catch the sun's reflection. Above this circle of light was also a bit of rainbow.

THE BREAKS

We would stop every hour or so and move around to keep our blood circulating. We were advised to climb out of our seats, and stamp our feet. We did not always do this because of the cold, and because it was too much of an effort. We also had to drink something periodically, so that we did not get dehydrated.

Stopping for a break

"The High Arctic Outdoor Cafe"

By the side of our sledge, somewhat shielded from the wind, Peter set up shop. I dubbed it "our High Arctic Outdoor Cafe!" He would bring out tins of coffee powder, tea bags, sugar and artificial milk (which I did not like). We had been given a set of plastic utensils—a cup, bowl, plate, fork and spoon—which we had to use throughout the trek. We would get our cups out and make the beverage we liked with difficulty, because of gloved hands. Without gloves, the fingers became numb in less than two minutes. Peter had also brought chocolate bars. The Inuit boys, Randy and Clyde, ate a lot a them but I thought of the calories, and avoided them!

For our first lunch we stopped at a place called Brown

Island which looked like a small iceberg, but was really an island, though it had merged with the frozen ocean. Terry had made sandwiches for us, which had frozen, but we must have been hungry because we stood around on the snow, somehow munching the sandwiches, chewing woollen particles from the gloves in the process. On other days we had instant soup for lunch. There was a choice of flavours—beef, pork, chicken—and vegetarian for me. Peter would pour hot water in the foam cups, the soup and noodles would thaw for two minutes, and then they were ready to be eaten. They were tasty, filling and hot; but it was hard to hold the cup and eat, with gloved hands. There was nowhere to sit. Besides, it was too cold, and pacing up and down seemed a better idea.

In the biting cold it was not possible for me to take off a glove and write, so I had brought a tiny tape-recorder into which I spoke occasionally. When we were moving the ski-doo made a noise, as also the sledges being dragged on snow. So I liked the stops, because then it was quiet.

Every time we stopped I ran to Peter's ski-doo and looked at the mileage. I wanted to know our progress. When we were moving I never felt that we were going too slow. We generally went at a speed of 20 kmph, and travelled for eight to ten hours, or even more, every day—including periodic breaks.

The first day fine snow flew constantly, sticking to every surface, gathering in pinch-like piles in the corners of the

window. It was just a little coating, but it clung so firmly that it could not be shaken loose nor swept off by hand. Some of it sneaked inside the opening around my neck, and I had to adjust the cotton turtlenecks better. The air and atmosphere were deadly. I sat erect, and looked straight ahead. If I turned my head even a little, the wind lashed my face. The cold air was too much for the nose. It got chilled when I pulled the neck-tube down. My "throne" inside the sledge-box was not arranged ideally, and I kept slipping down. I hoisted myself up a little, but then there was a bump and I slid down again. Standing up to stretch or climbing out at break-time was a great effort.

With gloved fingers I constantly wiped the fogged sunglasses. Once I blew on them in order to wipe them clear. The hot air from my mouth froze immediately into a solid film which never melted. Luckily I had another pair of sunglasses. At times I wanted to get away from the brightness of the sun. It darkened my skin more and more. But there was no escape from the sun or the cold. Once it became so cold that it felt as if it was minus hundred. There was no shade or shelter, and we stood around shivering!

SIGNS OF LIFE

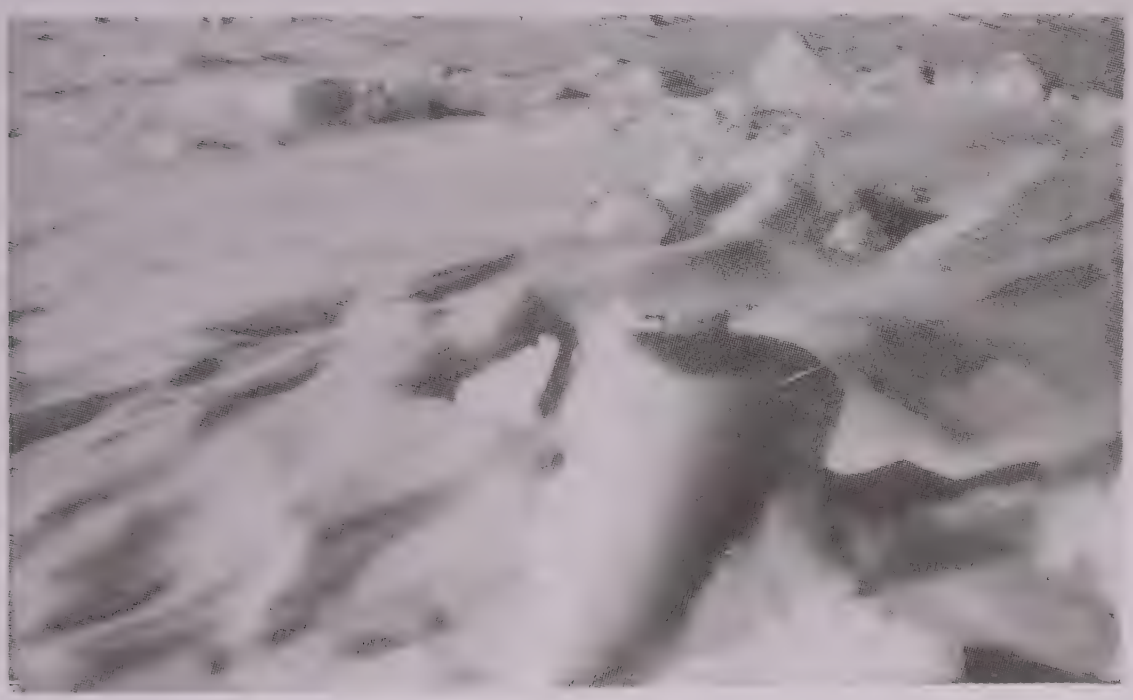
One afternoon Peter suddenly stopped his ski-doo. His trained eyes had spotted something moving in the distance! A white shadow on the white expanse, up on the hill to the right. It was a white wolf, the graceful king of the Arctic animals. He had stopped, and turned to give us a glance; but he was moving away. Wildlife photographers spend weeks trying to capture the white wolf and the polar bear. We at least were getting glimpses, and that had to satisfy us.

On another day the wind was a little lower but the terrain was somewhat rough. We were quite shaken by the many bumps, when the drivers spotted some musk-oxen far away. We went a bit closer. Then the five drivers unripped their ski-doos from the sledges, and sped towards the animals. They rounded them up and brought them nearer us. It was a herd of five or six, of which three remained close together, surrounded by the four ski-doos. Peter came back to us and took photographs. The three beasts arranged themselves strategically——hinds together, faces towards

us.—— looking out in three directions. They have great survival instincts, and are supposed to be survivors of prehistoric animals. With a huge body and a rich, dark fur of a beautiful brown colour, they are like big bulls. We climbed out to take pictures. The musk-oxen stood still.

Musk-oxen roamed and grazed in the area round Bathurst Island. There the snow-cover was light, and the pebbly earth showed. We did not see those rare animals again.

On similar terrain we saw signs of vegetation that had challenged the Arctic winter. There were tiny dry twigs, standing up to their two-inch height, with peppercorn-sized flowers crowning them.



Domain of frozen snow

In fact, I felt that even the snow had life. I felt response. I sensed that it was alive. When I walked it cracked and it heaved. Its texture varied, its taste varied. It looked as beautiful as a smile. I could see tiny air bubbles trapped inside blocks of ice. I had no doubt that this was living, breathing snow. We were also amazed to learn that this frozen cover was only two to three metres thick, and that under it was flowing water in which fish swam. Through hollow patches and large cracks I could see up to a metre down the air-filled empty space. There were carved out corridors, pillar-like support beams and intricate passages through which air reached the marine life. Thus I had peeks into an extraordinary mysterious world.

THE SNOW

Even when the frozen ocean surface appeared completely flat, it was still somewhat rough; we knew this from the constant bumps. The snow looked soft and fluffy, but it was not so. It could not be scooped up or dented by a fist. Every few steps the surface changed—as if the snow was exhibiting different moods. On a hardened area no footmarks appeared when I walked; it seemed as if the snow was rejecting me. And then, after a few steps, there would be marks. It was as if the snow suddenly wanted to cling on. At places I noticed subtle ripples etched on the white surface by the wind. At another place the surface was covered with snow bubbles and appeared like a moonscape. We reacted to the region in our own way. I ate this pure, white, clean snow every day with relish. Pascal and Anthony played with the snow, by throwing discs of snow-crust at each other.

The sledges slid on frozen lakes and rivers. If one got stuck in the snow, the other drivers helped to pull it out. Being stuck in the snow felt like being marooned.

One morning the sky was cloudy and hazy. Though the sun had disappeared its light was reflected so strongly that we could not see beyond a few feet. To add to the lack of visibility the wind churned up the snow and haze rose from the sea-bed. When the drifts became thicker those in the sledges could not see each other. The wind howled like an enraged beast, hitting against the sledges, as if wanting to take them apart. This part of the journey was bumpier and more bone-bruising than any other.

Finally we stopped at a place somewhat shielded from the wind-direction. Here Anthony noticed a rectangle of ice which looked like a big tombstone. He and David had been obsessed with the Torrington-graves, and the photographs of the frozen corpses. They made a shallow "grave", and lay there with their mouths and eyes wide open. I could not look at the original photos, but the silliness of these two men made me double up with laughter. But it was also slightly morbid. Hans and Pascal did not participate and the Inuits kept away.

STOPPING AT SLEEP-TIME

There was a system of setting up camp. The ski-doos would pull the sledges parallel to one another and tents were pitched between them. Randy and Clyde opened the tents and tied them securely to the heavy sledges. Anthony was always at hand to help them. I tried too, but they were

Setting up camp

too heavy for me! I could not even pull out the thick sleeping-bag case. Nor could I stuff it back in the sledge-seat the next morning. I always needed help with this. Even simple acts like putting boots on or taking them off, were strenuous, and my left hand started to pain a little. Still, I made and rolled up my own bed.

The tents had double walls for insulation, and plastic flooring. The older ones were dull-coloured, and became dark inside. The new ones were bright yellow. When inside them it seemed as though they were lit by many lights. We took whichever tent was pointed out to us—except David, who made sure that he got a new one every time. Peter had a bigger tent which was also the kitchen. All five of us could fit in there. With three stoves burning, it was warmer than in other tents, nevertheless I usually shivered. Peter kept in touch with Resolute every day through wireless radio.

I liked our camp. It was colourful against the total whiteness of the Arctic. I took pictures of it every day. But getting in or out of the tent was a sobering experience. The opening was small and complicated with layer after layer of material. Our gear and the heavy boots made us clumsy and lose balance. I tumbled in and out every time, and got exhausted with the effort. And moreover, inside was as cold as the outside. There was nothing to lean against, and to get any rest I had to lie down.

I spent many hours alone in my tent on the Arctic Ocean. I kept the opening a little ajar, enchanted by the lovely light,

High Arctic Ocean

and studied the map. I did not talk into the tape-recorder much, because I was usually too excited, or too uncomfortable to speak coherently into it.

ENJOYING THE SUN

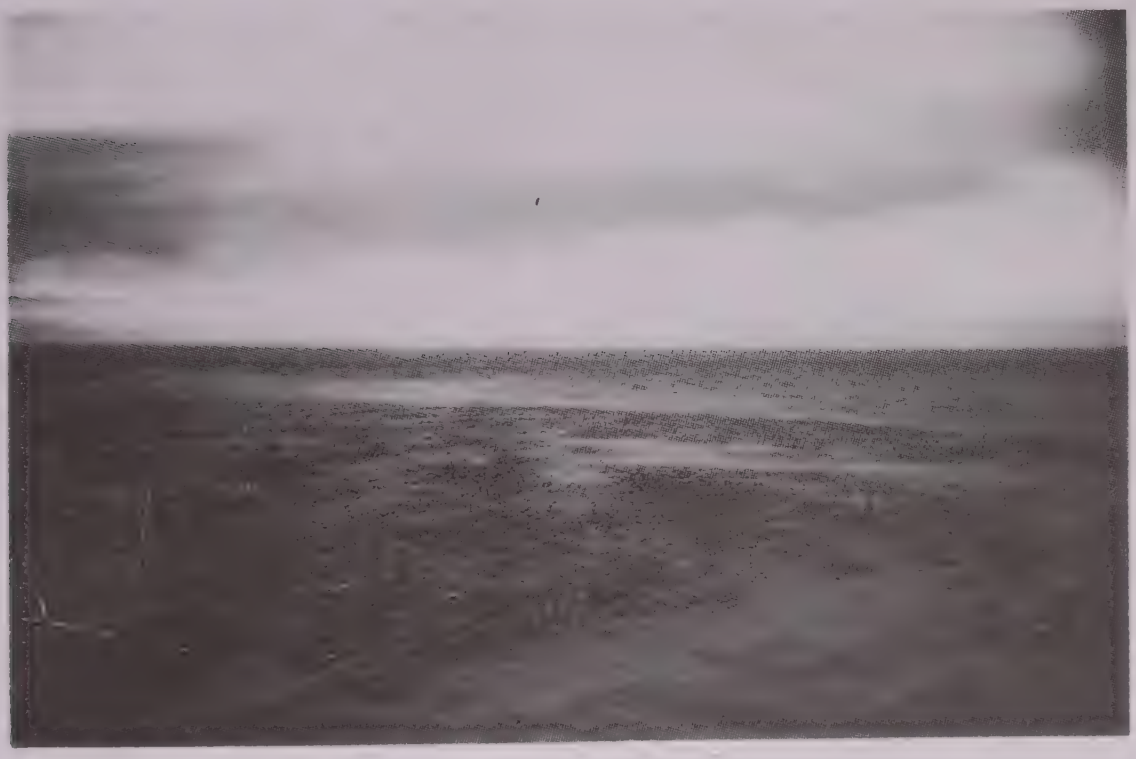
The 24-hour daylight in the High Arctic was wonderful for me. We were so high on the globe that the sun always remained parallel to the horizon. Around nine at night its light would become very gentle, and milky. Because of this continuous light our schedule was not bound by set times. And thanks to the dry cold, we did not get sweaty or dirty. We remained in the same clothes for six days, but did not itch or feel any discomfort. Hands, however, were another matter. I had taken off my gloves and had touched the sledges, the tents, the snow and I had eaten with my hand. When I put an unwashed finger to my eye it burnt, puffed up, and remained swollen for four to five days.

We had to wipe our plastic utensils, rather than wash them as Peter forbade us to waste water. Water had to be made by first cutting chunks of ice and then melting them.

For me dinner consisted of plain boiled rice which Peter cooked, and, a couple of times, boiled vegetables. For the others he had precooked non-vegetarian items. I was happy

when dinner was really late—at 10 o'clock, maybe. That way the five of us were together in the kitchen-tent, talking, sharing experiences, staying awake; otherwise, we went to our own tents and were in solitude. There was nowhere else to go, and it was too numbingly cold for us to remain comfortable outside.

The last two nights we even did that. Pascal and I wanted to see the midnight sun. All the others had long gone to the comfort of their sleeping-bags. Only the two of us waited, outside in the polar chill. That night the sky was clear, a lovely pink spread in the west, and the sun became a red ball; then clouds hid it. We were especially lucky on the last night. At the given hour we were rewarded with a beautiful



Midnight sunset

midnight sunset. The sun remained close to the horizon, not touching it. No clouds moved in to hide it. The sky became scarlet. Then even Pascal went to his tent. I was alone, mesmerized. Sitting by the tent's opening I watched the sun coming up again. Another day had begun right in front of my eyes.

THE ATTAINMENT

On the last two days we camped within the radius of the Magnetic North Pole. Pascal had remembered to bring a compass. Its needle went mad, because it was "home". We were at the centre of the earth's magnetic field.

There was lots of trapped ice in that area. It looked as if a colossal crystal chandelier had fallen and broken into countless pieces. For as far as the eye could see, the ocean surface was cluttered with different shapes and sizes of ice. There were points and pinnacles, piles and mounds, scoops and steeples of snow. I walked around taking pictures. After a while, when the sledges were unable to make their way through this icy upheaval, our leader decided to continue by ski-doos. I picked up my cameras, my icons and the dried roses from the sledge. Severe bumps, slipping off our seats, and holding on with difficulty summed up our journey by ski-doos.

We came to a spot I consider unique. It was like a palatial compound. At one place snow was piled up into a small

Photograph of the group

hill—the perfect backdrop for flags and photographs. Peter put up a sign saying "Magnetic North Pole". The Canadian flag flew on top of the staff, and on either side the colourful flags of our five countries were hung: German, Chinese, Swiss, Irish, and Indian.

It was a very emotional moment for me. I congratulated the other travellers. We took photographs of groups in many combinations—with the drivers, without them, alone, sitting, standing, at the top of the mound, etc. I set up my little shrine on a high slab of ice and placed the statue of Ganesh and the dry petals of the red roses on it. In the background were the sign and the flags. Two things meant a lot to me—to have reached the pole—as an Indian—and

Frozen ocean

to have carried the roses there as a symbol of my husband's love.

Then quietly I sat down on the snow. There was a small slab of snow, perfect as a pillow, right there. I lay down and put my head on it. There was hardly any wind, and that made the cold bearable. With my finger I tried tracing patterns on the frozen surface, and looked at the tiny perfectly shaped snow-flakes. I spent a serene half hour that way.

The next day a small plane arrived with the second group of travellers, picked us up, and flew further north. But the pilot could not find any suitable place to land on the frozen ocean. He circled the area for twenty minutes and finally

landed with many bumps. This spot was totally different. The ice formations were rather strange. The snowcap had a haphazard, cluttered look. But it was exciting. I walked around and took more pictures. There were many icebergs. Around them the snow was very soft. I sank down in it, up to my padded knees. It was impossible to walk without getting buried like that! It was chillier here, and breezy. We did not spend as many hours here as we had at the previous place. The five of us had been to two polar spots on the ninety-mile radius of the Magnetic North Pole. Nippirkangnaq—the fascinating Inuktitut name.

Snow gobbled up the knees

TWO TOUGH OUTINGS

We returned to Resolute safely, and that night rested our aching legs and bump-bruised bodies. I still had two more days in Resolute. So did Pascal. We were both keen to take a dog-sledge ride, so arrangements were made for this. In

Dog-sledge ride

the afternoon a girl called Mavis took us out to the frozen ocean where the dogs were tied. She was big-built, strong, and looked older than her twelve years. Her father was away, so she was handling the ride with her young cousin Norman. Two adults were needed to untie and harness the dogs. Mavis and Norman could not manage the dogs well.

The air was so clear that we could see Somerset Island, over 120 kms away. It was bright and sunny, but very cold. I shivered in the wind and cold while six or seven restless, jumping dogs were being harnessed. Being hauled was even harder. On the out-going journey I faced the strong light of the sun, on the way back I faced the strong wind. There was no relief. This was not fun. My forehead throbbed in the chill. My nose hurt from breathing cold air. Mavis could not control the dogs well. At times they refused to run or stopped in their tracks and paid little heed to her calls. When they did run, they emitted gas, thanks to the pressure of running. These white, golden brown and dark dogs were Arctic animals, and they liked running on snow, but lacking a competent master they became lazy. The experience was a test of endurance for me.

Signal Hill was right behind the village. Pascal and I decided to climb it on foot. That morning as soon as we stepped out of the lodge we felt the slap of the powerful wind, but continued on our way. The slope that had looked gentle was, in fact, very steep. But I took up the challenge, and did make my way to the top eventually. On the top it

On top of the Signal Hill

was windier and colder. Pascal was still on the look out for fossils. I just gazed at the unending white vista. Then I walked up to an Inuit structure that was partly like a throne. I sat in the lap of the old stones, and motioned to Pascal to take a picture. I was covered from head to foot and looked like a primitive Arctic being, or a strange stuffed animal!

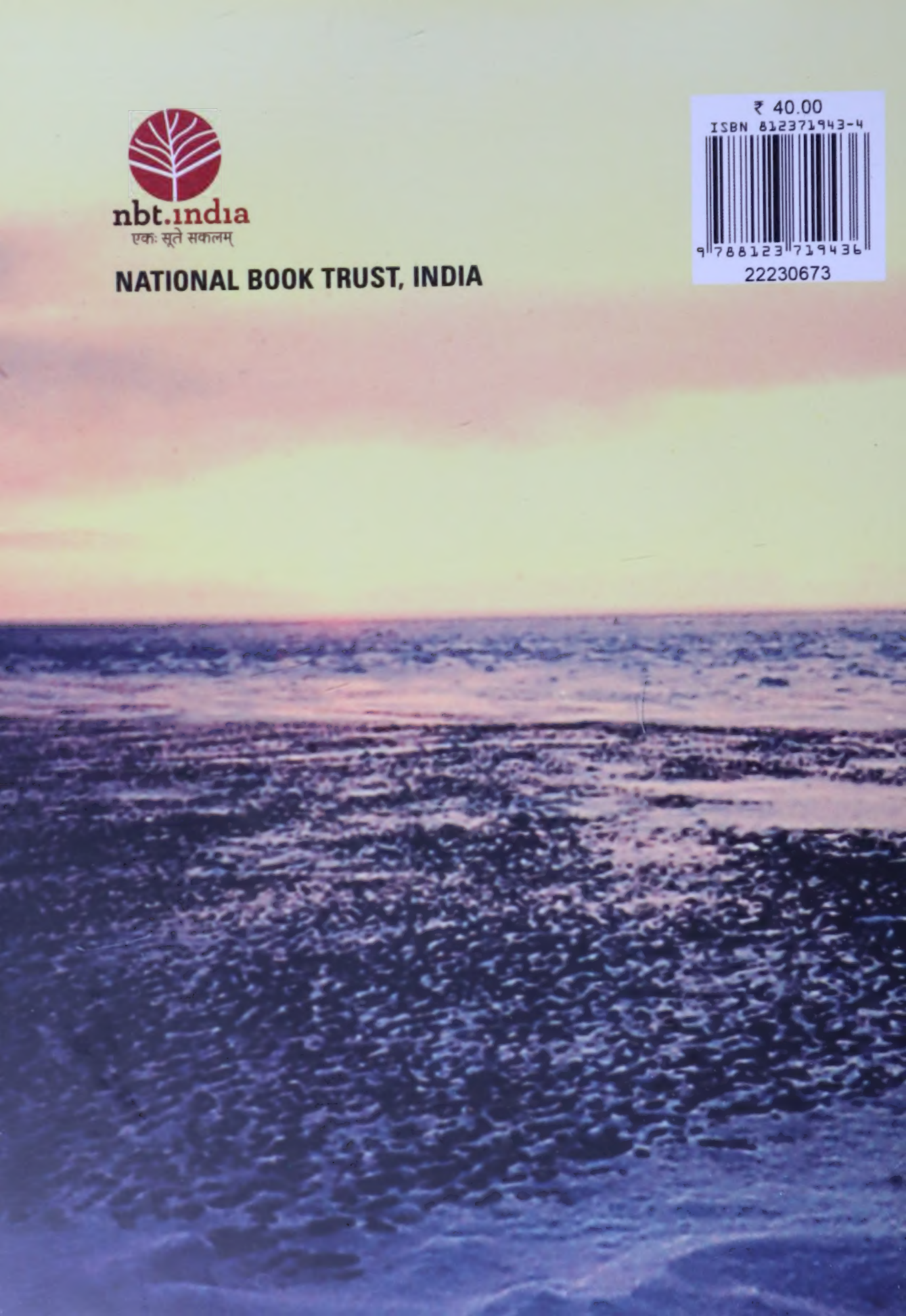
Coming down was no easier. It was slippery, and we had to pick our way carefully. On a lower slope, the snow permitted our sliding down at some speed, and that was fun. But everything during this outing was exhausting—the cold, the wind, the climb, the gear. My determination had triumphed.

JUST BEFORE LEAVING

On my last evening in Resolute, around eight o'clock, the light was gentle and golden. In the comfortable temperature of the lodge I was wearing light clothes and had a shawl draped over my shoulders. Suddenly the desire to take some photographs seized me and grabbing my camera, I ran out—in my slippers, forgetting to put on my boots. The next instant I was sliding on the slippery ice and the camera had gone flying from my hand. I could have banged my head on the ice or on the stones. The camera could have been smashed, along with my bones. Luckily both survived. The High Arctic was not to be taken lightly.

Just before I left Resolute I saw a bird flying in the sky. Excited, I went to the lodge to tell everyone about it. It seemed as if from the distant hills a bird had flown out specially to say good-bye. It was also a sign that spring was coming.

Printed at: Chandu Press, Delhi-110092



nbt.india
एकः सूते सकलम्

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

₹ 40.00
ISBN 812371943-4
9 788123 719436
22230673